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**The Iowa Blind History Archive
History of Blindness in Iowa - Oral History Project
Interview with [Name]
Conducted by [Name]
[Date]
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**Mike Hicklin, Des Moines
Mary Clarke
102 NW Des Moines St., Ankeny, IA 50021
9/22/2010**

Mary Clarke: I am visiting today with Mike Hicklin. Mike Hicklin has recently retired from the Iowa Department for

the Blind, where he was supervisor of the Maintenance Department. Mike's address is Iowa Department for the Blind, 524 Fourth Street, Des Moines, Iowa 50309. We are meeting at my residence in Ankeny, Iowa. The date is September 22, 2010, and it is approximately 1:30 in the afternoon.

A little bit about the background. I was an employee also at the Iowa Department for the Blind, and so I have known Mike for approximately 27 years. And, Mike do I have your permission to record this interview?

Mike Hicklin: Yes, you do.

Clarke: All right. Mike, I'd like to begin with your family. I understand that your wife's name is Carolyn, and you have a daughter, Becky, and I think a more recent son-in-law. Could you tell me a little about how you and Carolyn met?

Hicklin: Actually, Carolyn and I grew up in the same little town in Southeastern Iowa, Rose Hill, so we've known each other all of our lives. I went away to college at UNI and we basically started dating after I returned from college. We were married, I guess, in 1971, if my memory serves me correct.

Clarke: You would be in big trouble if...

Hicklin: Yes. It seems like just yesterday. We began working at the Department in 1971. I came as an Industrial Arts teacher. We have a daughter, Rebecca, who is now 29. We've lived in the building three different times over the years, and currently live there to help out as apartment

staff. Last October, Becky married Matt Boyd and they now live in the south part of Des Moines. What else...

Clarke: Okay, so you said you started working for the Department in 1971. What were your responsibilities at that time?

Hicklin: I was the new Industrial Arts teacher. I learned the ropes of doing that and started teaching. I was just fresh out of the University of Northern Iowa with a degree in Industrial Arts; spent, well, the next couple of years, or so, teaching Industrial Arts. At one point then, there was a need, because of some staff illnesses, for someone to help fill in in Field Operations, and so I moved on; left Orientation. Paul Hahle, I believe, came back. Paul had been a former Industrial Arts teacher. And, I went to Sioux City and helped fill in for the staff member that was ill for a year. That staff member came back, and I guess, that's a long time ago. I decided to take advantage of a teaching position at Iowa Lakes Community College, and went there to work from 1974 through 1978. Came back to the Department in 1978, John Taylor was the Director then. I helped out teaching travel for several months. Dave Quick, in the meantime, was who had been the Counselor for Southwest Iowa, and was promoted to being in charge of Field Operations. Dave recruited me from Orientation to come back to Field Op., since I was already trained from working in the Sioux City territory years before. Anyway, I moved then into fill in the territory where Dave had served, which was 12 or 13 counties in Southwest Iowa. And, did that for quite a number of years. Eventually, the territory was changed to doing the South Central counties, and Bonnie Linquist then

took over the Southwest territory. Some years later then, I left Field Op. and got into the supervision of Maintenance, and then eventually into being Building Manager, and all that sort of thing for all the rest of the years. Retired after about 39 years, and looking forward to future unknowns.

Clarke: All right. I know those future unknowns, because I also retired, and am looking forward to new experiences. I'm very much interested in the updating and the maintenance that you did in the building, while you were supervising your staff in the Maintenance Department, because I also know that you went out of your way to really explore the history of the building, as you updated the building and worked on maintaining some of the things that were there. Could you talk a little bit about, for example, I know when I came in as a student to the Center, the front door was, I think, a solid door that didn't let in any light, and yet, there is a beautiful door there now. Can you talk a little bit about how that came about?

Hicklin: Yes, I have compiled some notes on a history of the building over the years. Maybe I can just go through from early on, and we'll try to cover all the questions.

Clarke: That sounds great.

Hicklin: In 1899, Des Moines' first auditorium was built at 516 Fourth Street, which included most of the Brown Garage that sets to the south of the Commission building and all of the Commission building along Fourth Street. It had a capacity for 4,500 people and was the second largest auditorium in the United States. The largest auditorium was

said to have been in Chicago. This new auditorium was damaged by fire in June of 1900, and was rebuilt within a few months in time for the Republican State Convention. The first permanent home of the Des Moines YMCA was built in 1891. It was a wood frame building located on the northwest corner of Fourth and Grand, approximately where Domino's Pizza is now. The Y was growing very rapidly and was providing much-needed social service programs for young men. By the early 1900's, the Y and its programs had outgrown the building. Planning began for a new, much larger building. In 1909, fundraising drives raised \$160 thousand in 10 days for a new YMCA. One of the fundraising schemes was people bought bricks for the new Y at ten cents a piece. That would have been a lot of bricks for \$160 thousand.

In 1911, the Des Moines auditorium, that I mentioned earlier, had a second fire, and at this time much of the structure was destroyed. The land from the northern end of the auditorium was sold to the YMCA. The southern portion of the auditorium was later rebuilt as the Brown Garage, in 1928. The Insurance Exchange Building at Fifth and Grand was built a few years earlier, in 1923. The architectural firm of Proudfoot Bird and Rawson was chosen to design a new YMCA building. That architectural group has recently been recognized by the American Institute of Architects, who recently reviewed the significant architecture in Iowa, and listed the 50 most significant buildings in the 20th century with an IPBN video documentary of the same name. Proudfoot Bird and Rawson had six buildings listed in that essay, which speak very well for their work during the early 1900s. Those buildings are: 1900, St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Harlan; 1906, The Polk County Courthouse in Des

Moines; 1913, the Masonic Temple building in Des Moines, I believe it's called the Temple of the Performing Arts now; 1922, Roosevelt High School in Des Moines; 1923, the Equitable Building in Des Moines; 1932, the Iowa Des Moines National Bank building in Des Moines.

Back to the new Y building; the new Y was designed in a Chicago style, and is an early form of a design used in the development of skyscraper building projects in cities, like Chicago and New York City. The building was built to be very strong, which is why it's still in good shape now, some 100 years later. It was actually structured so that the building could be much taller than it is.

In 1911, a political candidate, William Jennings Bryant, three-time Democratic candidate for President, helped lay the cornerstone of the building, in which a time capsule was placed with memorabilia from 1911. That cornerstone was opened in 1959 by the YMCA, but there was no known record of what had become of the contents.

In 1912, construction on the Y was completed at a cost of about \$250 thousand. The building was built in a U-shape, adding a large courtyard open to the south alley. May 21, 1912, with the interior still incomplete, the first event was held at the YMCA; an informal dinner was held for fundraisers, administrators of the Y and the press. William Jennings Bryant was in attendance. Bryant purportedly visited YMCA's all across the country and called it "wonderful in its completeness."

June 5, 1912, the building was open for 10 days by the public. The first of the events was a dinner for the workers who constructed the building, nearly 100 workers from 25 states, provinces and countries attended. It was said that

the YMCA building was the best job of work put together in Des Moines.

June 13, 1912, the building was formally opened with a street parade with 1,500 people walking from the old Y to the new. Some of the features and facts that were listed with the new building are as follows: The new building cost a little over \$250 thousand and contained more valuable features than any other public building in Iowa, at that time. One-half of the third floor, and all of the fourth floor, fifth floor and sixth floor, aside from the Physical Department Annex, were devoted to dormitories. There were 116 dormitory rooms, of which nearly half accommodated two persons, and one ward room provided low cost housing for 12. Capacity was 172 men. Lodging ranged in price from \$7 to \$20 per month.

15:00

Hicklin: The cafeteria was located on second floor, had a beautiful oak wood finish, tinted walls and ceiling, and red tiled floor and cozy social nooks. It attracted several hundred people daily and served all three meals. Private dining and meeting rooms were adjacent to the auditorium banquet room and were separated by rolling oak partitions, and 400 people could be served, and that is located, basically, where Home Ec. is and the Orientation classrooms now. The main room was two stories high and had an elevated stage; 550 people could be seated in view of that stage and that auditorium was basically where Home Industries used to be, for those who remember that. The Physical Department occupied the entire west section of the building, having two splendid gymnasiums; the larger one

with a visitor's gallery and a rubber, cork floor running track, two handball courts with a sky light. A special room for wrestling, sparring, fencing, and individual exercise. Shower/bathrooms for men and boys, a 20 by 60 swimming pool, a men's locker room with accommodations for 1,200, and a boys locker room equipped for 500. Two adjoining gymnasiums 80 foot by 55 feet and 55 feet by 36 feet were designed to allow three distinct basketball courts. Two regulation-sized handball courts, the first in Des Moines, three regulation bowling alleys and four pool tables were located in the basement, where Industrial Arts is now. The gymnasiums in the back were located where the assembly room is now, and where the cafeteria, kitchen and the mailroom are currently located. There were 40 shower baths in total. The main lobby for the men, and as beautiful a lobby for the boys, commanded the admiration for all who visited the building. It was here that office business was transacted, coats and hats were checked, reading matter and correspondence provided, games played, and many comfortable chairs and an Ingall nook with an open fireplace, to invite relaxation and social chat. At the rear of the main lobby, opening to the right of the Watson Powell entrance, was a back parlor for general use. Men could meet there to sing around the piano and ladies, here, were welcome. Commodious offices were well-equipped and there was a vault for safe keeping. There was a 50 station switchboard. In construction of the building, the educational needs of the young men were not overlooked, and a dozen different rooms were available for night class work.

In 1925, the YMCA made additions and alterations to the building. Two levels of handball courts were added to

the sixth floor roof. An addition was built in the courtyard, beside the pool area, for various activities, such as wrestling, squash and handball. Four levels of library stack areas are now located in that addition. The old YMCA building was for sale in 1959, and had an insurable value of \$965 thousand. Private business interests were trying to get the building as cheaply as possible, and thought the YMCA did not have a buyer. The Commission for the Blind was, at that time, housed in a three-room office suite in the Amos Hiatt building located at East 12th and Court Streets, just across the river from downtown. It was described as a cramped, poorly-kept space, made up of cast-off furniture. Staff morale was very low. Services to blind people were very inadequate. I believe we were rated as the worst state services for the blind in the country, at that time.

Kenneth Jernigan became Director, and in early 1959, was able to persuade the State Legislature to appropriate \$300 thousand to purchase the new YMCA building at Fourth and Keo, and \$50 thousand to alter, equip and maintain the structure. There were numerous obstacles and pressures created to stop the state from purchasing the building, and to keep the Commission for the Blind from using that building. One example is a memo dated January 25, 1960, from Mr. Jernigan to Governor Herschel Loveless that mentioned various actions taken by the State Comptroller to block the Commission from moving into the old YMCA building. The State Comptroller advised that the Commission could receive federal money, but did not have the authority to spend it. He wrote, "In view of all the headaches you have been having with this building, are you really sure you want to move in at all? There will be all sorts of complications after you get in, and if I were a

department head, I don't believe I would want to move my department into the problems and headaches." The Comptroller felt the state had been taken for a ride in purchasing the building. He concluded by saying, "Of course, you have only a week before the state will get possession of the building, and you really won't be able to find people to fill all the custodial and other jobs in this short period of time. If I were you, I wouldn't touch the building. I wouldn't want any part of it." The Commission for the Blind occupied the building on February 1, 1960. The building had six floors and a full basement. However, the Commission was able, at the time, to move in and use only the basement and the first two floors because of fire regulations.

The building, in 1960, was described as follows: There are 33 sleeping rooms, 2 store rooms, 2 linen closets, 2 shower and lavatories on each floor, of floors four, five and six. There are 2 handball courts above sixth floor. The sand and gravel roof appear to be in good repair. There are 23 sleeping rooms with similar toilets, showers, utility rooms on the third floor with two squash courts and a gymnasium about three floors high west of the main building. There are 2 handball courts off the first floor of the gymnasium. The second floor consists of an auditorium, a large assembly room or hall, offices, 2 club rooms, a good-sized kitchen, including a walk-in refrigerator. On the first floor is the main desk, as you enter the building from the Fourth Street entrance. The building also has an entrance from Keosauqua Way, a spacious lounge, a ten-stool food service grill located near the Keo entrance. A good-sized boys department off the Fourth Street entrance, which I believe we now call the Rec. Room, some club rooms and offices.

The full basement is utilized by a swimming pool, locker room, steam rooms, cabinet repair rooms, and mechanical equipment rooms, and a bowling alley. Heat is furnished by steam from the Brown Garage. An Otis elevator serves the building.

Then, from a newspaper article from the Register and Tribune, dated Sunday March 21, 1960: at about 4:47 p.m., the Des Moines Police on patrol smelled smoke, investigated and discovered the Commission building roof was on fire. John Taylor and James Valiant were working, but were initially unaware that the roof was on fire. The roof and 2 levels of the handball courts were destroyed with primary fire damage extending down through sixth, fifth, and fourth floors. It was estimated that 185 thousand gallons of water was used to fight the fire. It was described as a very difficult fire to fight. Hoses had to be raised to the roof with block and tackle due to the height of the building. The source of the fire was thought to have been electrical in origin, from the two story high handball court structure that was located at the south end of the sixth floor roof. That area is where the deck area of the sixth floor roof is now. Once the fire had been extinguished, Commission staff and students worked throughout the night and next day to reduce water damage to the remainder of the building. In the aftermath of the fire, the State Executive Council set aside \$41,127.11 to be used for rebuilding, repairing and restoring the fire-damaged building, and passed the following Executive Council resolution: The State Executive Council hereby commends the Des Moines Fire Department and the Commission for the Blind staff, for preventing widespread fire and water damage to the state-owned building located at Fourth and Keosauqua in Des Moines,

Iowa. Speedy and efficient action taken by firemen limited the fire to a relatively small area. Kenneth Jernigan, Director for the blind commission, his staff, and blind students in training, worked throughout the night mopping up the water, which may have ruined floors, walls and ceilings. Mr. Jernigan exercised excellent judgment in taking all necessary remedial measures to meet problems arising from the situation. Unquestionably, the excellent manner in which this emergency was met by the Des Moines Fire Department and the Commission for the Blind staff saved the tax payers of Iowa many thousands of dollars, and has preserved the building for the intended use of becoming a training center for the blind. The Secretary of the State Executive Council shall send a copy of this resolution to the Des Moines Fire Department and the Commission for the Blind. Signed by Herschel Loveless, Governor; Melvin D. Synhorst, Secretary of State; Clyde V. Akers, Auditor of State; M.L. Abrahamson, Treasurer of State; Clyde Spry, Secretary of agriculture and attested by W. Grant Cunningham, Secretary.

I was looking back here; remember that the building actually burned on March 21, 1960. Well, by April 14, 1960, some 24 days after the fire, the following was noted in Commission minutes: Even though the Commission is only able to use part of the building at the present time, the Orientation and Adjustment Center has already taken shape and is now in operation. Under the present arrangements, students cannot live in the building. They are forced to find outside living quarters and come in on a daily basis for training. The men are living in the new YMCA, and the women in a boarding house. No shop work could be carried on in the building until alterations are made, space prepared

and equipment purchased. The grill, located on first floor, which was formerly open to the public, has been closed off with plywood, and is now being used for Home Ec. teaching. The Library of Congress agreed to give the Commission, without a charge, a collection of Braille books and talking book records worth several hundreds of thousands of dollars, if the Commission could provide space to house the collection and a librarian to take care of it. That collection was housed in the west gym area of the building, which is now the assembly room, and the cafeteria and kitchen areas and the mail room. And, also utilized the overhead running track and observation deck for book storage. Books were reportedly hand carried...

30:00

Hicklin: ...using block-and-tackle and ladders, to gain access to the running track area above. Thus, the Library began.

The building has undergone many remodelings and alterations over the ensuing years. The first general remodeling started in 1960 and ended in the summer of 1961, and cost \$384 thousand. It included a new main passenger elevator, dormitory rooms and staff apartments were created on fifth and sixth floors. The Director's Conference Room was built. The fireplace that had been in that area was removed from between the windows, and another fireplace was removed from the cafeteria area. The cafeteria kitchen was improved on second floor, which would have been in the southwest corner of the building.

Clarke: Going back to the fireplaces. There was a fireplace on which floor was that?

Hicklin: First floor. I'm told there was one in the Director's Conference Room, between the two windows that are on the north wall, kind of where there are built in bookcases there now and a television. Apparently, the fireplace was right in between those two windows.

Clarke: Oh, I didn't know that.

Hicklin: And then, there was another fireplace that was, apparently, in the cafeteria portion. And, it's rumored to have been over kind of where the vending area is now. It's kind of where the cash register used to set when it was actually a cafeteria line. It was kind of centered in that opening; there was, apparently, a fireplace there.

Clarke: That is really interesting.

Hicklin: The cafeteria kitchen was improved on the second floor and temporarily used for teaching Home Ec. It's noted that only women received Home Ec. training. It was located in the southeast corner of the building, and there are now library stacks behind the main central stairwell. The north fire stairs were built, which was the Watson Powell/Keo fire stairs and the two exterior iron, cast iron fire escapes, were removed from the north side of the building. Some library stacks were added. Home Economics was built in its present location, featuring two kitchens, a dining room and bathroom. Back to the kitchens, the contractor was allowed to build only one of the kitchens, and the students built the

other. Monty Rathbun was part of that student body, and the names of Merv Flanders and Jim Gashel have been added. They may have also been involved. Lucy Bagley, who worked in the Home Industries area, said that her husband, Monty Rathbun, told of the students dropping a new silver dollar behind the cabinets as they were being installed, to commemorate their efforts. In 1985, that kitchen was removed to make way for the new Home Economics classroom that we have today. The maintenance staff and I went ahead of the general contractor to remove that kitchen interior ourselves, in the hope of finding and preserving that silver dollar in honor of the students that had created the kitchen; and sad to say, the silver dollar was not found, leaving mystery as to what may have happened to it. On another note, the general contractor was quite pleased, as we had saved him many hours work doing the demolition.

In 1965, the second remodeling proceeded, providing a new boiler and air-conditioning system to the building. Until that time, steam was purchased from the Brown Garage for heating and there was no air-conditioning, but there was some 270 windows that could be opened. The Director's office area was remodeled to its present form. The Field Op. main office was built in the upper half of the second floor auditorium. A new floor had to be added to accomplish this. Two freight elevators were also added to the library stack areas.

In 1969 and 1970, a third remodeling of the assembly room was created, and two floors of library stack areas were created above, where the old running track and ceiling had been...observation area. The cafeteria/vending area was built into its present form. A hydraulic freight elevator was added to the west end of the building, again, for moving

of library books back and forth. The Business Enterprise Program was housed in new offices, which are located now where the Aids and Devices store and photocopy room are. New bathrooms were added in the area just outside the assembly room. Windows were replaced; many had been bricked-in, including the director's office windows and all the basement windows, and the Director's Conference Room windows. The exterior entrance doors were changed to heavy steel doors, which is, I believe, what you were talking about Mary, that the entrances were blocked in a good bit.

Clarke: Yes.

Hicklin: Several new stack areas were created. The southwest fire escape was added. New office areas on the west end of both second and third floors were created. In 1974-1975, the courtyard area was filled in, and five new floor levels were created. One of the interesting things that happened during the excavation was that human remains were found under one part of the courtyard area.

Clarke: Is that right?

Hicklin: Just below the accounting area. The Department of Criminal Investigation was called in to investigate, and the Polk County medical examiner, Dr. Wooters, I believe, was called in. They determined that the body had been there for many years, and it could have even been an artifact, but no one knows. A very large deck area was created on fifth floor, for the Director. It was noted that all of the windows facing that deck were covered with an aluminum louvered system that would permit ventilation into the student rooms,

but did not allow viewing of the deck area. Stack areas were remodeled with new shelving, and new offices were built along the east windows of the Library on fourth floor. That area had been a book shelving area prior to that, and the pool area in the basement was remodeled.

In 1983, under direct threat that business interests would be able to force us out of the building, we attempted to get the building placed on the National Register of Historic Places. That attempt failed due to the manner in which the building interior had been altered since the YMCA days. Luckily, the business district expanded to the south with the Court Avenue area being revitalized, which took some of the pressure off the building. The Marriott was built to the west and later the Embassy Suites were finally built one block east of downtown, which relieved more of the pressure on the outside interests for acquiring our building. The fact that our building has been kept in such good repair over the years also helps buffet the acquisition attempts.

In 1983, the Maintenance Department installed a Johnson Controls computerized building automation system of all the major mechanical equipment in the building to reduce energy consumption, and to better manage the building environment. In 1985, Home Economics was remodeled and four kitchens were created. The students, under Dave Hauge's leadership, built one of the four kitchens in honor of the tradition started back in the early 1960's. In 1986, the Department installed its first building-wide computer network, linking many computers into one database. It was very primitive, in comparison to what is here now.

In 1986, we also saw a full sprinkler system being added to the building. It was sized to exceed requirements

for extinguishing any potential fire. The building also has an electronic fire detection system, which was installed several years ago. The loss of life from the Younkers Merle Hay Shopping Center fire serves as a reminder of the potential for loss of life from a fire and the toxic smoke that occurs.

Clarke: Yes, I remember that very well.

Hicklin: In 1988, all the windows in the building were replaced with highly efficient units with exterior trim that closely matched the original wood windows of the building. Most of the windows were designed to open for life safety considerations in the event of another fire, and to take advantage of fresh air during appropriate times of the year. The arched glass appearance was once again restored to the building on the first floor windows. During the demolition of the Rec. Room windows, it was discovered that the interior arch of the windows had been covered with a cardboard or masonite-like material that had been hand-painted in oils with scenes related to YMCA activities. Five of the six paintings were recovered and saved. The first of the panels sadly was destroyed before anyone realized their existence. The panels were covered in a heavy black dust, maybe coal dust, that made them indistinguishable until the first panel was begun to be destroyed and some of the dust fell off, and we then realized there was painted scenes. Anyway, the remaining panels were saved for, perhaps, future restoration and re-display. They were painted in oil. Some were signed by an artist, whose last name was White and they are dated 1937 and 1938, and appear to be

depression era art. Those have been saved and stored away for, hopefully, restoration at some future time and re-display.

In 1989, the Fourth Street entrance steel doors were replaced with new insulated glass door units, and the archway that we designed ourselves. This restored and enhanced the appearance of the Fourth Street entrance. Dave Hauge and Mike Hicklin worked together designing and building the huge bent oak trim that duplicates the original trim of the building entrance. It is a large U-shape, about 15 feet tall and seven and one-half feet wide. Live steam was used from the boiler to bend the individual pieces of the wood for this arch. We had been told that no one locally could bend the wood trim that large, and to do so would be very costly. That was a sufficient challenge for both of us, and we accepted it and build it. In the fall of 1989, and spring of 1990, a new air-conditioning chiller system was installed, replacing the old steam absorption system. This new electric system was a very high efficient electric chiller system. The most cost effective way to bring the new chiller into the building was from the south alley through the men's gym into the boiler room. The men's gym was in great need of restoration, so the entire space, including the adjacent store rooms, were demolished with plans to later use the combined space as a new gym area for both men and women.

Of some note, the new Department telephone system was installed on Halloween Eve, October 30, 1990. It was an IBM Roam Phone System. The Iowa Communications Network and Iowa Department for the Blind maintenance staff worked together throughout the night, finishing around 4:00 a.m. Halloween morning.

45:00

Hicklin: Since that time, when we've had problems. We tease that the system has been possessed ever since installed on Halloween Eve.

In the fall of 1990 and in the spring of 1991, the old men's gym was redesigned and developed into a large, combined exercise area for both men and women. New locker areas and bathrooms were included. In 1992, the third floor roof and air-conditioning system cooling tower was replaced. That new roof protects the library stack areas below from water damage. The new cooling tower replaces the existing wornout tower, and is a great deal more energy efficient.

In 1992, through 1993, we did a fifth major remodeling; we've remodeled a lot over the years. This was a major code compliance project. The main stairway and the south fire stairway were extended to the sixth floor roof. The main stair steps were replaced with marble and hand rails, raised. A new second exit was constructed from the Rec. Room to the south fire stairwell. Numerous interior doors were added and were replaced to meet fire code requirements. A second fire exit was added to the Keo fire stairs from the second floor level of the northwest library stacks. The cafeteria dining area was redesigned to meet building code with a fire rated glass wall, and automatic entry doors to meet ADA guidelines; tables, chairs and booths were replaced. A new wider entrance was created into the assembly room. New large bathrooms were built, and the stairway from the first floor to the basement near the cafeteria was removed, because it was too steep and

exceeded the code for that. The sidewalks were also replaced at that time.

In 1998, the sixth floor roof and deck were replaced. Two gas grills were added for cookouts. Students built flower planters, developed and have maintained over the years, a beautiful roof garden area. Also in 1998, the boiler was replaced with a highly efficient new unit that is of higher efficiency and has much lower stack emissions to improve outdoor air quality. In 1999, the maintenance crew replaced backbone of the building network using fiber optic cable and high speed switches and cabling. We ended up using about five miles of fiber and copper cables to complete the project. The network server room was moved from fourth floor down to the second floor.

In 2000, the second floor north area was renovated, with new offices training rooms and conference rooms being built in the old auditorium in the home industries and aids and devices area by the maintenance crew. Dollars were short at that time and we couldn't afford to hire a contractor, so that area was basically done by ourselves and we had a good bit of fun doing it. The Aids and Devices area moved from second floor to first floor. Business Enterprises moved from first floor to second floor. Accounting moved to the former BEP area of first floor. The assembly room was remodeled to meet fire code requirements.

In 2001, the fifth and sixth floors were remodeled. The general contractor went bankrupt during Christmas time after working for only a month or so. The project was completed using the performance bond that had been required as part of the construction project. It is fair to say that we did gain a few gray hairs along the way getting it all completed. A hotel style card access lock system was

added to improve dormitory security. Card access locks were also added to the main entrance doors of the building. A new building-wide fire alarm system was installed.

In 2002, new fire and smoke sealed doors were added to the main passenger elevator. In 2004-2005, the Rec. Room and first floor lobby renovation project was completed. The look and feel of the design was directed toward restoring the original appearance of the Rec. Room. Sadly, in 2005, the cafeteria closed, but a new vending area was created. The second floor west office area, which had earlier been converted back to library stacks was once again restored to office space for staff. There are currently six office spaces in that area now.

In 2006, a new digital sound studio was designed by Tim West and built by the maintenance crew on the fourth floor. Then, 2006 also marked the beginning of the design process to remodel third and fourth floors, and improvements for the building's air handling and electrical systems. Then, from 2007 through the end of 2009, third and fourth floors were completely remodeled and potentially toxic building materials were removed. Electrical systems were improved, and a new HVAC system was added, bringing in fresh air and greatly improving air quality to much of the building. However, air handlers 2, 5 and 6, located in the southwest portion of the building, were not replaced due to much higher than expected costs. During that same period of 2009, artist, Ann Cunningham created several pieces of tactile art, which are displayed on first and fourth floors. In 2007, space was leased at 920 Morgan Street, just south of downtown for additional storage of some of the Braille collection.

In 2010, we have moved the Braille collection from Morgan Street to the Mercy Capitol Building, which I believe is now being called the Iowa Building. It's the former Des Moines General Hospital. Lower storage costs could be obtained there without the potential of flooding. We learned after moving into 920 Morgan, that we had to move the collection out of the building a couple of times because there was a very real threat that the entire area would be flooded out, and we didn't want to run the risk of losing the Braille collection. We continue working on getting the Department building placed on the National Register of Historic Places as the threat of downtown development is always a possibility with continued growth. The present central location of the building is ideal for easy access to transportation and restaurants, and creates high visibility for the Department and its many programs and services. The air handlers 2, 5 and 6 project still needs to be completed as soon as funding can be secured. It will take about \$1 million, and that's in 2009 dollars. So, in ensuing years, it will be slightly more costly as things get more pricy. Replacing those air handlers will improve indoor air quality and save a good bit of energy. The leaking roof that is now 20 some years old will also be replaced as part of the air handler project, which will be good news for the two floors of Braille stacks that are located directly below that roof. Since the time of the history being written, we have received preliminary approval for placing the building on the National Register of Historic Places, and we will continue to work on the remainder of that in the coming months and years.

Clarke: All right. So, you have the preliminary...what did you say there at the end?

Hicklin: We have the preliminary approval for placing the building on the National Register of Historic Places. This time the emphasis is on the programming and services that have taken place in the building over the years, not necessarily the building itself, or the architectural significance of the building. It's for the programming and the services that have been provided over the years.

Clarke: That is so interesting.

Hicklin: Shan Sasser has worked long and hard on that National Register application, and deserves a good bit of thanks for all her hard work on that.

Clarke: Yes. I just look over all the changes that came over the years. That is, you know when you look back on it, you see it happening, and you don't think too much about all of the work and all of the planning that went into that. You know, but when you see it all laid out in the way you have laid it out, it's tremendous...tremendous changes!

Hicklin: Well, we were covering almost 40 years there, and it took lots of really good hard work and people to make it all happen.

Clarke: Yeah.

Hicklin: And, we've been fortunate over the year. And, it's worth saying that the Commission for the Blind has always

supported the repair needs of the building, so the building has been kept in really good shape and we've prided ourselves in keeping it clean and nice over the years. So, it's something that we all can be proud of.

Clarke: Can you just address a little bit the reason why we have our own building staff, maintenance staff?

58:30

(Recording is still going, but the interview has temporarily stopped. There is some chatter and then the interview resumes.)

1:03:00

Hicklin: I believe that dates back to when we first purchased the building. Mr. Jernigan wanted to be able to hire all of the staff and be accountable for that staff, so that there would be uniform control over all of the work that was happening. With respect to maintenance staff, cleaning office areas, and having people who have contact with the other employees of the Department, the students, and the general public coming in the building, it's good to be able to hire and be able to pick and supervise directly your own people that you know will do a good job. So, many commercial buildings utilize private cleaning services, even back in those days. And, a problem that can be encountered is that you have lots of new people coming in that work maybe a short period of time, and then someone else is coming, and so you're continually training new temporary staff. And, when those folks have contact with staff and students it was felt that it would be far better to have our

own people doing that. Also, it's fair to say that when the building was purchased, we were given the right to be an exempt, I forget how that was...we were an exempt agency, which meant that we really had control of our own staff and spending our own money, and, of course, rightly held accountable for that, but that gave us a lot more flexibility in directing the programs and services.

Clarke: Good.

Hicklin: That was kind of a long, drawn out response, but it's a simple thing that has worked so well over the years.

Clarke: And, I can see also the value of having, the fact that, because of the students learning to be independent and learning to take control of their lives again, and if you have staff that do not understand that, it can sometimes undo what the program is trying to do to help these students along.

Hicklin: Yes, certainly so.

Clarke: Yeah, I can see that. The whole building is so fascinating. You think of all the lives that have gone through that building, you know, from the time it was constructed until this very point. To me, it's just sometimes overwhelming thinking about all of that. Years ago, I think, when they built it for the YMCA...never would have dreamed that it was going to be the center of one of the best programs in the United States for the blind, you know.

Hicklin: Yes, certainly the building has touched many, many lives. One of the interesting things that has happened over the years...random people would stop in and want to...just people off the street would stop by the administrative offices and say they had come to the YMCA back when they were a little boy, and that they kind of remembered what the building looked like 50 years ago, maybe swimming in the pool or living up on fifth or sixth floor or third floor, and would ask to take a short tour of the building. And, it's really interesting to hear the stories of some of those folks over the years. One thing I forgot to mention, one of those people is a neighbor of one of our now retired Library staff, Doug Cole. One of his neighbors was a youngster when the building first opened, and, you know, we're talking 1912, 1913, somewhere in there. Anyway, this neighbor had saved a booklet that showed the building and showed pictures. It was kind of a souvenir book for the YMCA. Anyway, he had saved that over the years and gave it to Doug, knowing that Doug worked for us. Doug brought it one day and we made photocopies of it, which we've now saved for historic record of the building. It's really interesting to see some of what was written, and the pictures that are there. There have been lots of people over the years that have set foot in the building, like this gentleman. Another, Ronald Reagan, our President, just lived up the street towards Vets Auditorium or the Events Center, likely set foot in the building back in the days when he was at WHO Radio. There have been lots of interesting things written in the Des Moines Register that highlight some of the old areas of downtown around the building. Those are all part of the materials that we've saved for the historical record, which is now being

categorized and put into a collection for folks to review in later years.

Clarke: You know, on second floor there was a wooden floor. Was that a dance floor?

Hicklin: It would have been the auditorium floor, and my guess is that it would have extended actually further out to where Home Ec. is. It would have encompassed, I believe, pretty much all of the north end of second floor, because that was a large auditorium area. It had a stage down at the west end of the auditorium. Where Home Ec. is now, there were dining areas and room areas there that could be cordoned off using large sliding oak divider walls/doors, and that area was a multipurpose area, from what I've read. Rooms could be created using those paneled doors, and there were a lot of things like GED-type classes that took place up there. Also, some of the people took college credit courses from time to time. The auditorium was used for many fine arts type performances, singing and music. It was quite a well used area in the building.

Clarke: Yeah.

Hicklin: But, anyway the wood floors were part of the style of construction back in those days. It's very likely that the same type wooden floors were also on the sixth, fifth and fourth floors. The story that I've heard is that those floors were destroyed by the fire. In thinking of the fire, one other thought that comes to mind would be, when we remodeled the Rec. Room area some years ago, when we were doing the demolition for that, we discovered that above the

suspended ceiling you could still see where water damage had occurred from the fighting of that fire. There was something, like, 160 thousand gallons of water that was poured into the roof of the building to try and put the fire out, and all that water had to work its way down through the building.

Clarke: Right.

1:15:00

Hicklin: And, you can see where the original plaster walls...how they had been water-stained from all of that. From what I'm told, when the staff and students were mopping up and squeegeeing up the water, what they were doing was pushing the water from the floor...all the area of the floor back towards the central stairwell, and actually pushing that to the stairwell where it would free fall to the basement, and then it was mopped up. It was a huge thing, I think, and all they would have had would have been mop buckets, probably not the vacuums and things in that day; because with the fire, all the electricity in the building would have been turned off, so it would have been very labor-intensive. A good bit of work to do.

Clarke: It's amazing that within a month from the time of the fire, they were back in the building?

Hicklin: Twenty-four days I believe. It was a very tenacious, hardworking, goal-minded staff and student body. The emphasis was to get the dream started, and that has blossomed over the years. It's been, from my perspective

over the 39 years; it has been a really neat place to work. The Department has always seemed like a family type situation. People cared for one another, and that's really from my experience in working in other kinds of commercial buildings and industry. It's kind of a unique thing, where people really care for one another and support one another and help one another to accomplish the mission of the Department. It's been a really special place and will certainly continue to be in the future.

Clarke: Well, thank you Mike for all the information you gave, and sitting down and sharing everything. It's just overwhelming in some ways to think of all that, and very, very interesting.

Hicklin: It is. Certainly, I'm not an orator. Hopefully, some of this has made sense. It's been a lot of fun, and even though we're now retired, Mary, the only thing that's changed is our pay status. There's still a lot of work to be done.

Clarke: That's right, that's right, there sure is...always. I'm just kind of at a loss thinking about all of the planning that went into all the renovating of different areas and then kind of in a way re-renovating, because of the needs of the program, you know in keeping up with technology and keeping up with codes and just everything; it's just overwhelming to me.

Hicklin: It has been a huge undertaking, and one of the things that might be of some interest...we have used, basically, the same architectural firm over most of the years

for all the renovations of the building. We've been fortunate to be able to do that, and that has created a situation that's very positive; in that, they know our building inside and out and have all of the old drawings and some of the design, and some of the problems that come up are made somewhat easier, or the effects are lessened by the fact that the architects really have been around a long time, too. So, that has added a lot of value to the design. With this last major remodeling, one of the things that occurred was the architects and engineers actually held meetings with the entire staff of the Department to get their input as to what they needed to best do their jobs. And, it's interesting that the final design for third and fourth floors, certainly, we had a concept of what it would be before we started, and what it ended up...what was created at the end is a good bit different, and it's different because of the input the staff gave. That's made it a much more workable and inviting area that is poised to provide service to people for decades to come.

Clarke: I think, you know, talking about the staff having that input, that's part of that whole feeling of being, you know, part of a family. And, if you look at the history of employment among our staff, we have a lot of staff that have been there like 30-35 years.

Hicklin: Yes.

Clarke: Or like you, 39 years.

Hicklin: 39 when I left.

Clarke: I mean, when you think back, well I was thinking of Doug Cole, for example, he was there 30 some years, I believe.

Hicklin: He was there 40.

Clarke: Forty years?

Hicklin: Yes.

Clarke: So, he would at most have had to have been just out of his teen years when he started. I mean, you know.

Hicklin: Yes.

Clarke: In his 20's probably. And, to think that you have given that much of your life to a program that you really believe in is just awesome to me, you know; which says a lot for the atmosphere at the Department.

Hicklin: Yes, it certainly does. We've, many of us, grown up there and grown old there.

Clarke: That's true. A few more aches and pains. Well, once again Mike, thank you so much for doing this. I appreciate it.

Hicklin: Well, you're very, very welcome.

1:22:58

(End of Recording)

Jo Ann Slayton
4/19/2011